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Book Review

by Catherine Compton-Lilly

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Creswell, John. (1997). Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five traditions. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications. 403 pp. US\$28.95 (paperback).

"So, You Want to Do Some Research..."

You've got a great question, or you're teaching the most amazing group of children, or you're trying something new in your classroom that really seems to be working and you're thinking that this latest passion would become a great research project. Your enthusiasm is obvious as you talk with colleagues, but now that you have a vision, fear begins to set in. What do you do next?

As a teacher who has experimented with classroom research, I know that "doing research" can seem overwhelming. If you're like me, you took a research methodology course back in college which focused on deciphering quantitative studies and learning seemingly endless lists of terms like validity, sample, and verification. Now you may be involved in a teacher research group affiliated with a local college that meets monthly to discuss how people's research projects are progressing. However, that doesn't seem to be adequate to equip you for the research task.

A book that I find particularly helpful is Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design: Choosing Among Five Traditions by John Creswell. Although this book is not written specifically for teacher-researchers or even educators, both novice and experienced teacher-researchers will find this book useful. In his book, Creswell has identified five traditions of qualitative research which he compares and contrasts throughout the book. The book is full of engaging examples and specific suggestions tailored to each of the five research traditions.

The five traditions examined in this book are biography, phenomenology, grounded theory, ethnography, and case study. While some of these traditions may be more useful and practical to teacher researchers than others, Creswell's comparison of five traditions clarifies the purposes of each research tradition and examines each research tradition in terms of what it is and what it is not. While Creswell explains that different research traditions can be combined within a particular study, helping researchers to identify the primary tradition in which they are working can help to clarify the parameters of the study and focus the researcher on the purpose of her/his project.

To illustrate the potential value of this book, let's imagine that I am a teacher-researcher who is very interested in what parents and students believe and understand about learning to read. I read through Chapter One which introduces the purpose and rationale of the book and Chapter Two which introduces and describes qualitative research in general. These chapters provide me with a

general understanding of the methods and purposes of qualitative research. In Chapters Three and Four I am introduced to the five traditions of qualitative research. I read through each of these and consider which tradition best fits the work that I envision. I decide to do a grounded theory study since I am interested in generating a theory that explains and explores parents and student conceptions about reading.

Of course being relatively inexperienced I have no more idea about how to start a grounded theory study than I did about how to start a teacher research project. So I read on. In Chapter Five I have an opportunity to think about various philosophical assumptions that underlie qualitative research and consider various ideological perspectives. Although the ideological perspectives include complex and rather intimidating topics such as postmodernism, critical theory and feminist approaches, Creswell's introduction provides the reader with a general background of each ideological perspective and succinctly outlines distinctive aspects of each approach. For readers who want to further explore these ideological perspectives recommendations for further reading are included.

Then it's on to Chapter Six that guides the reader through introducing and focusing their study. And finally I arrive at the chapter on data collection. In all sections of the book, both general comments about qualitative research and comments specific to grounded theory are provided. After reading this section I put the book aside for a while. I have an idea of the type of study I plan to complete, some theoretical issues that I may want to explore, a sense of how the study will be focused, and some idea on the types of data I will be collecting. I begin to collect data.

After a month or so, as my piles and files continue to grow, I begin to wonder about what I am going to do with all this stuff. So I again start reading beginning with Chapter Eight on data analysis. I continue to think about analysis as I transcribe taped interviews and collect more data moving back and forth between preliminary analysis and data collection. I continue with analysis after all the data is collected and read the concluding chapters on writing up the research and evaluating my own work.

By now I am skipping around and reading primarily the sections of the book that relate specifically to grounded theory and skimming those that are less relevant. In addition, I consulted one of the many books Creswell recommends that focuses specifically on grounded theory for further information. I have also found the appendixes helpful. In these appendixes the author has presented an example of a research article in each of the five traditions.

Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design: Choosing Among Five Traditions is a clearly written book. It presents information in ways that are both informative and reassuring to the busy teacher-researcher. I highly recommend this book to anyone ready to explore their own compelling question.